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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001052

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SUBJECT: COPEI: LAST DITCH SCRAMBLE FOR REJUVENATION

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) Venezuelan Christian Democratic party COPEI shuffled its executive after young party members revolted against the leadership of former secretary general Cesar Perez Vivas in March. Former international relations secretary Sadio Garavini told poloff the new leaders were good but criticized his party for cleaning house at a time when the opposition needed to appear most united. Although Garavini described the purge as a clash in personalities rather than policies, the new leadership did appear to have some real differences with Perez Vivas over political strategy. Like his counterpart in Accion Democratica (REFTEL), Perez Vivas was an overconfident leader focused on seeking help from the international community rather than on appealing to Venezuelan voters. Conversely, new secretary general Luis Ignacio Planas and his allies have been seriously examining the party's internal weaknesses. Whether the plodding self-reflection will help resurrect COPEI will depend on the still untested new leadership and its ability to adopt fundamental changes more quickly than it has in the past.

Public Explanation for Party Purge Spurious

12. (U) The president, the secretary general, and other senior officials of Venezuelan Christian Democratic party COPEI resigned March 10, according to press reports. President Eduardo Fernandez, the party's figurehead, said he

wanted to cede the way for new faces. Secretary general Cesar Perez Vivas, COPEI's top political official, claimed he was resigning to show his profound differences with President Eduardo Fernandez. He also denounced the penetration of the party leadership by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' movement. Perez Vivas' explanation begged the question why, if Fernandez were resigning, he needed to step down in protest. His decision to remain in the party despite its infiltration by Chavistas was also curious.

A COPEI Coup?

13. (C) Daniel Thiman, personal aide to COPEI's former Miranda State Governor Enrique Mendoza, offered poloff in mid-March a more convincing explanation of the party purge. According to Thiman, young party officials in league with Fernandez maneuvered to kick out Perez Vivas. COPEI's executive committee rejected Perez Vivas' annual report of the party by a 46-4 vote, according to press reports. Fernandez' resignation was arranged as part of the deal for Perez Vivas to step down. Former international affairs secretary general Sadio Garavini, who stepped down as well,

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confirmed Thiman's version of events. In a March 27 meeting with poloff, Garavini added that the divisions in the party also fell along urban and rural lines, with Tachira-born Perez Vivas' contingent hailing from the Venezuelan interior.

14. (C) Garavini said that although he was closer to Fernandez than to Perez Vivas, he had reservations about the party machinations. Garavini said the new leadership under secretary general Luis Ignacio Planas was good. Nonetheless,

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he did not expect the purge would change COPEI policies

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because it was above all a struggle of personalities. COPEI needed to change its structure and to shed its image of the past, he said. He granted that the shakeup was needed, but he questioned the timing. One of the few opposition figures who has steadfastly promoted alliances, Garavini said Chavez' opponents were showing their divisions when they needed to look most united. His resignation letter suggested that his opposition to the timing of the purge prompted him to step down, although he may have fallen victim to the same deal that required the resignation of his ally, Fernandez.

The Two Former Wings of the Party

15. (C) CESAR PEREZ VIVAS. COPEI remained anchored to the discredited Fourth Republic during the tenure of former secretary general Cesar Perez Vivas. Perez Vivas exhibited

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an overconfidence and obliviousness to the fate of his party similar to that of Accion Democratica (AD) secretary general Henry Ramos Allup (REFTEL). In a late 2004 meeting with poloff, Perez Vivas said COPEI needed to distance itself from other parties in order to keep its own identity. He also shunned working with NGOs and unions. (Embassy note: Most other parties, NGOs, and unions enjoy greater credibility with the Venezuelan public than does COPEI. COPEI's share of the Venezuelan vote has dwindled to less than 4 percent in part because it retains the stigma of its pre-Chavez presidential administrations.) According to press reports, members of various parties complained that Perez Vivas hindered the formation of electoral alliances.

16. (C) Perez Vivas shared AD's strategy of looking for help

from the international community rather than courting Venezuelan voters. After telling poloff COPEI needed U.S. financing, he met with the Ambassador in August 2005 to make the same appeal. When Ambassador told him the U.S. strategy was to support grassroots organizations rather than weakened political parties, Perez Vivas pressed for indirect support through NDI or IRI. The Ambassador countered by offering to triangulate support with COPEI for social projects in poor areas, a strategy, he noted, the opposition especially needed to adopt. Perez Vivas agreed, but never returned with any concrete proposals.

17. (C) EDUARDO FERNANDEZ. Former President Fernandez displayed a sophistication and cleverness in his public discourse that has been lacking among many opposition leaders. For example, in a speech honoring COPEI's 60th anniversary in January, Fernandez said that Venezuelans were paying dearly for the divisions and useless arguments of the opposition. Unlike most opposition spokesmen, who tend to hone in on electoral and other Chavez abuses that resonate little with the Venezuelan public, Fernandez attacked key Chavez weaknesses. He criticized the poor state of Venezuelan schools and hospitals. In a strategic approach few other opposition figures have adopted, he contrasted the money the BRV has awarded ("regalar") abroad with the "Dante-esque spectacle" in which Venezuelans lived. Fernandez was not always in line with COPEI policy, and as a primarily symbolic figure, was unable to change it. Along with Garavini, Fernandez opposed the decision to not participate in the December elections, reasoning that COPEI could not build a majority by abstention but only by "presenting an alternative program."

New Leadership Still an Unknown

18. (C) The new COPEI leadership has since adopted the

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cautious, participatory approach espoused by Fernandez during the legislative elections. COPEI originally did not endorse the "decatalogue" of 10 electoral reforms that AD and other parties demanded from the National Electoral Council (CNE). It has since reversed itself, pitching its endorsement of the 10 demands as an act of unity with the opposition. Unlike AD, however, COPEI is still participating in efforts to select a unity candidate and has signaled its satisfaction with some of the candidates for the CNE, according to press reports. COPEI's new secretary general, Luis Ignacio Planas, is a young official who has stuck to the party line in meetings with poloff. Although his promise as party leader is unclear, Planas appears to have no illusions about the difficulty of the task he faces. Before taking the reins of the party, Planas served as COPEI's national coordinator for organization and electoral control. As such, he was involved in a project called "Open Doors" aimed at signing up 250,000 party members. Planas presided over a conference attended by poloff in January on the future of Christian Democratic parties that soberly examined COPEI's weaknesses. Planas faulted the party's lost connection with the people and its unclear message. At the conference, party leadership and vision coordinator Roberto Casanova summarized party problems, some of which recalled the strategies of the notably absent Perez Vivas. According to the presentation, centralism, limited internal democracy, an inability to finance itself, a poor relationship with civil society, and an absence of ideology dogged COPEI. Since becoming secretary general, Planas has begun accusing Perez Vivas'

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remaining allies in COPEI of involvement in financial irregularities, according to Mendoza aide Thiman.

19. (C) The new party president, Orlando Contreras Pulido, is a relative unknown. The opposition's short-lived

electoral alliance had placed him second on its list of National Assembly candidates for Nueva Esparta State before its pullout in December. COPEI's new vice president, Virginia Rivero Lozada, formerly served as the party's national coordinator for human rights. She has been a helpful Embassy contact on both human rights and political issues, but has a reactionary demeanor typical of anti-Chavez politicians.

Comment

¶10. (C) COPEI will be better off without Cesar Perez Vivas. Just how much the party improves will depend largely on its untested leadership. COPEI's future will be more promising if the new party leaders share some attributes of their allies in the former party executive. The new blood will need to shed the party's image as the discredited remains of the Fourth Republic in part by seeking the kinds of alliances with other groups that Perez Vivas opposed. They will also have to act faster. Upon COPEI's announcement of its plans to restructure in December 2004, we reported that the party could not afford a lengthy period of self-reflection. Still, COPEI took over a year to begin carrying out its plans. These changes appear to be a good start, but they are only a start. COPEI's clock is ticking.

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